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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 STOCKHOLM 000105

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SWEDEN'S EU PRESIDENCY: MIGRATION MINISTER ON
ASYLUM AND MIGRATION ASPECTS OF "STOCKHOLM PROGRAM"

Classified By: CDA Robert Silverman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On February 11, Swedish Minister of Migration Tobias Billstrom discussed with us asylum and migration aspects of the "Stockholm Program." This is the planned five-year initiative that will replace the Hague Program and will aim to further harmonize EU asylum and migration policies, leading to a common European migration and asylum system. A package of recommendations is expected from the Commission by May, which will be the subject of discussions at the informal Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial in Sweden in July. Billstrom said Sweden thinks more EU member states should take part in the UNHCR quota program, and the EU should offer resettlement support to those it repatriates.

Bio Note: Fully on top of all aspects of his portfolio, Billstrom is a rising star in the ruling New Moderates. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On February 11, CDA met with Swedish Migration Minister Tobias Billstrom to discuss the planned "Stockholm Program" on asylum, migration and visa policies that Sweden will push during its EU Presidency, July 1-December 31. Billstrom made the following points:

-- The Stockholm Program will be a top priority for Sweden during the EU presidency, and could well be a "deliverable" adopted at the December EU Council. A package of specific recommendations on a common asylum, border, and migration policy would be produced by the European Commission in May and an agenda item at the subject of discussions at the July 15-17 informal Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial to be held in Stockholm.

-- Some of the Stockholm Program agenda items would be achievable in the short term while others might take a decade or more. For example, newer EU member states were more accustomed to "fleeing from" than "fleeing to" a country, so the importance they place on asylum policy is less than in other member states.

-- Sweden's goal is an "ambitious, balanced and forward-looking program" that strikes the right balance between "repression" (border controls, for example) and the integrity of the individual (and an efficient, responsive adjudication system). Sweden is not planning to develop an a la carte program with policies that member states could take or leave, but rather a cohesive set of policy and regulations.

-- On paper at least, there has been political agreement within the EU on the importance of uniform rules since at least October 1999, when the "Tampere" program was endorsed by the EU Council. But a decade later there still exist big differences in the interpretation of these principles, leading to vastly unequal distribution of migrants and asylum seekers across the EU.

-- Sweden would like to see the establishment of an European Asylum Support Office, which would not be a new agency but rather an advisory entity that would work to promote

information sharing and training opportunities. The Commission will put forward a proposal for such an office in May.

-- Sweden would like to see all EU member states taking part in UNHCR's quota refugee program. The flood of Iraqi refugees that washed up in Sweden in the last three years served as a "wake-up call" in Europe; "Yesterday it was Sweden, but tomorrow it could be another country," Billstrom stated. If all 27 EU states operated a re-settlement program that accepted a similar percentage of refugees as Sweden, then the EU as a whole might accept up to 90,000 per year.

-- The external dimension of a Common European Asylum System will also be important if EU member states are to be able to repatriate people to their home countries. Sweden offers re-establishment support for those repatriated to Iraq of roughly \$3,800 USD per adult and \$1,900 USD per child. This support has led to an increase in voluntary returns, with the ratio of voluntary to forced returns being 9:1.

New Labor Laws

-- "Demography does not lie" and the population of Europe will continue decreasing, Billstrom said, so the need for a flexible and responsive system of labor migration has never been greater. New visa regulations for skilled workers came into effect in Sweden two months ago, and 2000 skilled applicants have already applied for Swedish work visas. To date, some 80% of applicants had been approved, and 1000 individuals had been granted a visa, mainly nationals of

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India, China and Thailand. Given the shortage of skilled labor in rural communities, especially in northern Sweden, local officials see the program as "a golden opportunity" to bring nurses and other skilled workers to their towns.

Integration Challenges

-- On integration issues, the biggest challenge to Swedish society is less related to religious ideology and more to unemployment rates in migrant communities. "It is not just a matter of learning Swedish, but of connecting new Swedes to the open labor market," Billstrom said, underlining that the government is somewhat worried about continuing criticism for failing to integrate newcomers into society. Some 1% of Swedish residents are Iraqi origin, and another 1% are Iranian origin.

13. (C) Comment: Billstrom painted a rosier picture of Sweden's immigration and integration situation than the one portrayed in the media. Immigrant populations from the Middle East and North Africa are increasingly vocal in their dissatisfaction of the government's slow delivery of social services -- this despite the fact that Sweden has one of the most generous such programs in the EU. The government's Stockholm Program may have many merits for the EU as a whole, but it is also in part a reaction to the domestic problems here.

14. (C) Bio Note: Tobias Billstrom is a rising star in the New Moderates, the centrist faction of the largest party in the coalition government. A 2002 graduate of Cambridge University, he has risen very quickly through the party ranks and remains politically closely aligned with PM Frederik Reinfeldt. Appointed to the Cabinet in 2006 at age 32, he was given the migration portfolio, which he has fully mastered. He seeks out opportunities to discuss the intricacies of refugee policy at international conferences and he has used his expert knowledge of the subject to outmaneuver political opponents in Parliament who try to pin him down on the question of Sweden resettling Guantanamo detainees. Should the center-right Alliance be re-elected in

2010, we assume Billstrom will have a much bigger role in the
Cabinet.
SILVERMAN